

Over Burning Coals by estelraca

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Summary:

Nancy and Barb have been best friends since kindergarten, but as they grow up sometimes it seems like they're a little bit more than that.

Over Burning Coals

Author's Note:

- For [Emerla](#).

Spoilers here through the end of season 1, with some fiddling around with how canon could go to make Barb and Nancy's story not *quite* so depressing at the end. I hope this is something like you wanted, and that you have a wonderful holiday season!

Over Burning Coals

Barb is more than Nancy's best friend.

For one thing, she's Nancy's first friend. It's something that Nancy will wonder about as they get older. Does it make her childish, clinging to her first friend, holding that relationship up as something special?

Not that there are too many options, really. Living in a small town—even if it's a small suburban one instead of a rural back-of-nowhere place—means that the same people tend to be available for all your social circles. If it wasn't Barb that got to be her best friend, it would be someone else that she's known for a decade.

They meet in kindergarten, on their very first day. It hasn't been a very good day so far for Nancy. Her mother had left her here, in a strange place, with other children that she was supposed to *get along with*. What her mother hadn't explained was how she was supposed to get along with Anastasia, who had pushed her down during outside recess; or what it means to get along with Steve when he keeps pulling her hair any time they sit next to each other in story circles.

Nancy has segregated herself away from the other children for this play time. If she doesn't interact with them, maybe they won't have any reason to be mean to her. She is playing with a doll. There are more interesting toys lying around, but dolls are what her mother

buys her every year for Christmas, and it feels safe and familiar in Nancy's hands.

"What're you doin'?"

Nancy looks up at the girl standing in front of her. Barb is a large child—a few inches taller than Nancy, and much heavier. It had made her desirable for the Red Rover game at recess, though otherwise the rest of the children seem unsure how to react to her. Realizing it's been too long since Barb asked the question, Nancy holds up her doll. "Playing with Betty."

"Cool." Barb studies the doll, and she doesn't seem as excited as the word she used to respond would seem to indicate. "Want to make her a conductor of a train?"

"Huh?" Nancy blinks at Barb.

Barb's hands had been behind her, but now she pulls them to the front. Nancy can't read the words on the carton she's holding, but the picture depicts wooden train tracks with a bright red wooden engine. "I was able to snag the train blocks. But it's kind of boring playing with them alone. So..."

"You want me to play with you?" Nancy asks the question hesitantly, not quite believing her ears.

Barb nods. "Unless you don't want to. That's cool too."

Nancy suspects Barb wouldn't think it's very cool, actually, from the way she says the words. Smiling, she stands up to face Barb and gives a decisive nod. "I'd love to play trains with you."

They spend the next ten minutes setting up a very intricate track, with as many hills as they can manage. When they have the track done, Barb arranges Betty the doll on top of the bright red engine, and they push her around and around the circle.

"Look where we're going!" Barb's voice trembles with excitement as she narrates Betty's travels along her half of the track. "Over the mountains and far away, to a land so different you almost can't recognize it! With desert and cactuses and kangaroos. Does that

sound exciting, Nancy?”

Nancy takes over control of the train as it comes to her side. She's heard of kangaroos before—she watches Captain Kangaroo a lot, and her daddy had explained what kangaroos were when she asked why that was the captain's name. They're bouncy animals from somewhere far away called Australia, and if she's very good maybe they'll get to see one in a zoo someday. “We have to be careful of the cactuses. They are very pointy, and we don't want Betty to get full of pointers. Or to get kicked by a kangaroo.”

Barb laughs. “You worry about things a lot, don't you, Nancy?”

Nancy shrugs, continuing Betty's travels. “It looks like there's going to be a freak thunderstorm in the desert, too. Look at the clouds gathering! They're—”

“All right, kids.” Their teacher, Ms. Harrington, claps her hands. “Time to put your toys away. Once everything's in place, we can have a snack before we talk about counting.”

Nancy immediately begins cleaning up their train track.

Barb follows a moment later. “You like following instructions, too, huh?”

Nancy frowns. “You say that like it's a bad thing.”

Barb shrugs. “Not a bad thing. Just a thing.”

They finish cleaning up their area, and are some of the first to settle down in the circle. Barb is already counting off numbers on her fingers, starting at one and continuing up to ten.

Nancy smiles at her, glad to have someone to sit with, and begins following suit.

Maybe school won't be so bad after all.

* * *

They make Valentine's day cards for everyone in their class all

through elementary school.

It's one of Nancy's favorite times of year. Sure, she has to make cards for some of the people she doesn't like, but she also gets to choose just the right Valentine for the people she *does* , and that more than makes up for it.

Her mother bought her a set of puppy and kitten themed cards this year, and Nancy spends a good two hours picking out the proper card, attaching a piece of candy to the back of it, and adding a personalized message for those she really likes.

Barb's card is the best. She chooses one with a big dog on the front—the friendly, slobbery kind that frequently have the little casks around their necks in pictures. She attaches a dark chocolate piece to it. Though Nancy doesn't like dark chocolate much, she knows Barb loves it. And she signs it *To my very best friend in the world* , using her careful cursive handwriting for each painstaking letter.

When the time comes to present their gifts to everyone, Nancy hurries through shoving the rest of her cards into the bags and boxes that her classmates have brought so that she can personally give Barb her card by hand.

There aren't many cards in Barb's box. Nancy stares at the mostly-empty little red heart-shaped box, her lips pressed tight together. They're supposed to make Valentines for *everyone* . Why was that so hard for people to understand?

“Hey, Nan.” Barb smiles at Nancy, appearing unconcerned. Except Nancy can see the way her eyes keep flicking towards her mostly-empty box, and she knows that her friend is hurting even if she'd never say anything.

“Hi, Barb.” Nancy holds out her little gift, wishing she had done more—wishing she had been courageous enough to *not* make Valentines for those who don't deserve them.

“For me?” Barb's grin is genuine as she reaches out to take the gift. “Oh, my favorite!”

Standing up, Barb pulls Nancy into a tight hug. "Thank you, Nance. You're the best."

"Can't be, because *you're* the best. My absolute best friend." Nancy hugs Barb back just as hard.

Something bounces off Nancy's back, and she wheels around to see Ralph grinning at them. "Ooooh, what've we got here? Nancy and Barbara sitting in a tree, k-i-"

"That's enough." Mr. Jameson smacks a stack of papers against the back of Ralph's head. "Return to your seats, everyone. You've had quite enough time for Valentines. Ms. Wheeler, Ms. Holland..."

Nancy returns to her seat immediately, her ears burning.

Barb doesn't seem awkward or uncomfortable at all, and when Nancy glances over at her later, she blows Nancy a quick kiss that just makes her ears seem to burn more.

* * *

Middle school isn't kind to Barbara.

The teasing that had started in late elementary school worsens. People make oinking noises whenever Barb pulls out her lunch, and there are calls of *fatso* and *loser* whenever Barb shows off her talents. Since Barb is probably smarter than three-quarters of the school, and not afraid to show it, that happens frequently.

Nancy is pressured to break off her friendship with Barb. Most of it isn't direct, though Annie does suggest that Barb doesn't really fit with the *image* that Nancy wants to project.

Nancy's response is to stop speaking to Annie for a week, and that's the last anyone directly challenges her for sticking by Barb.

They don't have to be direct challenges, though. Barb usually isn't invited to parties; Nancy sometimes is, though that drifts off as sixth grade continues and it becomes clear that Nancy is going to continue to socialize with Barb.

Nancy is pretty enough that she could probably be a popular kid. She's smart enough that she could be one of the geeks—like her little brother is already proving himself to be, and like Nancy thinks Barb would be, if given the opportunity.

Instead Nancy focuses on her classes. Her mom is proud of her when she earns good grades— *she's* proud of herself when she earns good grades. It's one of the few ways *out* of Hawkins, Indiana. She can go to college, and become... well, she hasn't gotten that far yet. But something, *anything* other than another housewife.

Since Barb also likes to study, it's something that actually helps their friendship. They spend a lot of time pouring over books, learning what's needed for the tests. They spend a lot of time at the library, trying to find information beyond what their textbooks have.

“Ugh, there's so much *missing* from this history stuff.” Barb allows her history textbook to fall onto her face.

Their final exam is tomorrow, and they've been studying together non-stop for the last week. Nancy allows her own book to fall closed, moving to the edge of her bed so she can stare down at Barb. “What's missing?”

“All the interesting bits, for one.” Barb pulls the book down so that her eyes peek out over the top. “Or do you really think we just up and decided to have a civil war one day? Also all the women. They haven't mentioned a single woman in this whole section. What, did we not exist until the nineteenth amendment came around?”

“That's not true. They mention Harriet Tubman in the part about events leading up to the war.” Nancy flips the book open to find the page, Tubman's name shown in bold to indicate it's important.

“Whoopdido. One woman in a twenty-page section, and she gets a whole paragraph.” Barb rolls over, her textbook falling to the floor. “I've read books set during the civil war. They make it seem like things actually *happened* . Interesting things, lots of people dying—”

“People dying isn't interesting, it's sad.” Nancy frowns.

Barb shrugs. "It can be both. But you're right. It *should* be sad. *The greatest loss of life in US history* shouldn't be a sentence to memorize, it should be something they make us *feel*."

Nancy can't help smiling. "Have you thought about being a teacher someday?"

"Maybe." Barb grins. "But only if I can't make it into one of my more interesting careers. Okay, Nancy, let's go through this one more time..."

By the time Barb's mom comes to take her home, Nancy is sure they'll both ace the test the next day.

* * *

The winter of their eighth grade year sees the annual Snow Dance happening, and for the first time Nancy feels like maybe she's missing out on something.

"We could just go, you know." Barb makes the statement the third time she finds Nancy staring forlornly at one of the posters.

"I don't know." Nancy hugs her books closer to her chest. "It's not really something you go to alone, right? I mean... you're supposed to go with your date."

"We can always go together." Barb's smile is slow and infectious. She gives a brief bow, holding her hand out to Nancy. "Ms. Wheeler, it would give me the *deepest* pleasure if you would agree to attend the Snow Ball dance with me."

Nancy swats at Barb's hand, glancing around nervously to make sure no one has noticed. "Stop it, Barb. Be serious."

"I am." Barb straightens. "If you want to go to the dance, Nancy, I'll be very happy to go with you. We can go dress shopping together. We can even go out to dinner together before, if you want. It's not like we'll be the only ones going solo. Last hurrah of our middle school years and all that."

"You'd wear a dress for me?" Nancy can feel her cheeks flush. She

thinks there are some dresses that Barb would look very cute in, but she also knows her friend tends not to dress too traditionally girly, preferring styles that flatter her figure a bit more.

“For you, I'd walk over burning coals.” Barb's expression is strangely serious as she makes the declaration.

Nancy can feel her face heat even further, but she smiles at her friends. “Let's go dress shopping, then.”

* * *

They find pretty dresses together, browsing through all the department stores while Mrs. Holland waits patiently near the registers. It's a surprising amount of fun, and Nancy is thrilled with the dark red dress with the frills at shoulder and lower hem that she finds. Barb, for her part, finds a blue dress that she says will work with some alterations.

Mrs. Holland makes them display the dresses, ensuring they meet both her and Nancy's mother's requirements for decorum. Apparently satisfied that there are straps and enough material to keep even the most disturbed of their male counterparts from falling prey to uncontrollable lust, Mrs. Holland allows them to each check out on their own, hovering to ensure they aren't cheated of change.

The days leading up to the dance are nerve-wracking. They shouldn't be—what is there to be worried about? She's just going with her best friend. Their classmates will be there, sure, but the older they've gotten, the less cruel the teasing has become. So long as they stay out of everyone's way, nothing should happen.

Nancy is still practically bouncing in the car as her mother drives them in to school. What songs will be played? Will they be any good at dancing? She's tried a little bit of dancing in her room, but she always gets self-conscious watching herself in the mirror. Maybe it won't be so bad when there are others dancing, too?

Barb takes her hand and squeezes it. “Relax, Nancy. You're going to be the prettiest girl there, and we're going to have a great time.”

Nancy returns Barb's smile and the hand squeeze. "I hope you're right."

"Are you doubting me?" Barb makes an aggrieved face. "I don't think that's what you're doing, right?"

"Of course not. That would be completely uncool of me." Nancy gives a breathless laugh, and the smile that goes along with it is still on her face as they walk into the school.

Barb is right. The dance is absolutely amazing.

It really shouldn't be that special. It's just the people they tend to see day-in and day-out, and the school that they spend a third of the day trapped in. But with the decorations, with the music, with the lights—with their classmates all decked out in suits and dresses—it somehow seems more magical.

They dance a little bit, and even though Nancy knows she doesn't look anywhere near as graceful as the people in the movies, it's still a surprising amount of fun. Some of the boys even ask them out on the floor, and *that's* enjoyable, too.

Or it is until Nancy has to break away from Ryan when his hands become a bit too wandering.

"Aw, come on, pretty girl." He jeers at her. "Why're you gonna flaunt it if you don't want some action?"

There are two options—she can escape to one of the chaperons, and risk them both getting in trouble; or she can retreat back to Barb, who can still hold her own in a fight if it comes to that.

Nancy decides to go for Barb.

Barb notices immediately that something's wrong. "What happened?"

Nancy opens her mouth, considers all her options, and then just shakes her head.

A hard set to Barb's jaw tells Nancy that she's reading more into the silence, and Barb moves a few steps closer, her eyes scanning the

crowd behind Nancy. There is no one there, though, and after a moment Barb sighs. When a new song starts, she holds out her hand to Nancy and smiles. "Dance with me?"

Nancy hesitates and then nods. She's been enjoying the dancing—she's not going to let some boy ruin it for her. "Sure."

Dancing with Barb is fun. What Barb lacks in coordination, she makes up for in enthusiasm and determination, and by the end of the song they're both smiling again. The one that follows is a slow ballad, and most everyone who isn't part of a couple desserts the floor.

Barb stays, though, holding out a hand to Nancy. "Want to try it? Spinning in a circle can't be that hard."

"You know what?" Nancy takes the offered hand. "Why not."

The *why not* becomes obvious about sixty seconds into the song. Nancy meets Barb's eyes. Barb smiles. Nancy smiles. Before another minute has passed they've stopped dancing in order to laugh.

"Oh, my gosh." Barb wipes at her eyes. "Come on, Nancy. Let's go to the bathroom. I need to check my make-up."

Nancy tags along, though she could have told Barb that her make-up is already perfect.

The bathroom is disappointingly ordinary. No one even tried to decorate it, apparently figuring if you needed to be in here you wouldn't care. Barb starts laughing again once the door closes behind them. "Oh, man, that whole shuffling in a circle while sighing dramatically at someone held a respectable six inches away from you is so *silly*."

"It was a little ridiculous." Nancy smiles, though she also thinks she can understand some of the dramatic sighs. *She* was only dancing with her best friend, and she still felt a little... tingly where Barb's hands had touched her.

"Which is fine. Ridiculous can be good." Barb turns back around. "Are you glad we came?"

"I am. Thank you." Reaching out, Nancy takes both of Barb's hands in hers.

Barb squeezes them gently. "Don't mention it. I'm... really glad we came, too."

Nancy's palms seem to tingle again, and she can feel heat rising to her face.

"You know..." Barb sidles a little closer. "If you were a boy, I think I'd kiss you right now."

"If I were a boy, we wouldn't both be in the same bathroom." Nancy leans a little closer to her friend, anyway. "And who says you can't anyway? It can be good practice for when we're college graduates looking for a husband."

"Right." Barb's voice is a quiet whisper. "Good practice."

Then she leans forward, and Nancy leans forward, and it's ridiculous but it's also *wonderful*. Fumbling, a too-soft touch of lip against lip that is barely tangible, and then too rough, Nancy's lips feeling like they're being squished against her teeth, and then for a glorious moment *just* the right amount of pressure.

Then Barb is pulling back, her hands falling away from Nancy's as she reaches up to touch her lips.

"That... was nice." Nancy also reaches up to touch her lips, then points over her shoulder towards the dance with a thumb. "Should we..."

"Definitely." Barb reaches out and very deliberately takes Nancy's hand. "We've got a lot of dancing to do, after all."

* * *

The summer that follows is wonderful.

They're old enough that they're allowed to spend a lot of time alone. Their parents don't realize exactly *how* alone they are, Nancy doesn't think. They don't realize that long walks in the woods involve

holding hands; that holding hands frequently translates to kissing; that the kissing...

It's just practice. That's what Nancy keeps saying. It's something nice and fun and practice for when they have boyfriends.

Except she doesn't think about boyfriends when she's with Barb. She thinks about Barb—about the books that Barb has been reading and telling her about; about where they're going to go to college and what they're going to do there; about the way Barb's fingers feel as they explore her body.

She doesn't worry about it much over the summer. Summer feels... unreal, in a way. Without school setting the schedule for their lives, too young to be expected to hold down jobs, they have plenty of time to simply... be themselves.

To explore.

To have fun.

To say *I love you*, and it's *true*, so very true, but it's also...

It's not something they can ever say in front of others. It's not something that can go anywhere or really mean anything.

Can it?

"What are we doing, Barb?" Nancy asks the question with her head pillowed on Barb's shoulder, relishing the gentle rise and fall of her friend's breathing.

"Naming cloud shapes. That one looks like a unicorn." Barb lifts her free hand to point out what she means.

"I know that, but I mean..."

"I know what you mean, Nance." Barb sighs. "Are you... unhappy with what we're doing?"

"No. Not at all." Nancy sits up, looking down at Barb's relaxed form. "But... I mean... we can't keep doing this forever, right?"

“Why not?” Barb sits up on her elbows.

“Because we'll need... something more.” Nancy changes to a cross-legged sitting position. “A career. A husband.”

“A career, yeah. Only way to get ahead in this world.” Barb runs a hand through her hair. “But a husband... is that what you want?”

“I...” Nancy looks down at her hands. “I like looking at boys. You know that.”

“I do.” Barb reaches out, her fingers brushing against Nancy's cheek. “What does that have to do with this?”

“This is... I mean...” Nancy shakes her head.

“You're worrying about what other people are going to think. Again.” Barb's hand falls to her eyes. “I get that. I really do. And if you really like the idea of dating a guy... here, how about this. If you want to date some guy, just let me know, and you go do that. See what it's like. See how you enjoy it.”

“O-okay.” Nancy reaches out to take Barb's hand in hers. “It... won't upset you?”

Barb shrugs. “I want you to be happy, above all. And if that's what you need to be happy...”

Nancy leans forward, claiming Barb's mouth in a fierce kiss, and the rest of the afternoon is passed in comfortable silence.

* * *

It's harder to accept what she's been doing with Barb as real during the school year.

Everyone knows who is dating who. Everyone knows who is *interested* in who.

Everyone has this vague idea that there are faggots and queers, and no one wants to be seen as one of them.

It's easier for them to hide as women. All Nancy has to do is look at

the teasing her little brother and his friends go through in order to know that. Friendships that are too close, a speech pattern that's a little bit off, interests that don't fall within very particular categories that seem to include sports and hunting—anything that could be construed as strange or feminine is enough to get the label of *faggot* lobbed at a boy.

But if she has a tendency to reach for Barb's hand? If they spend almost all of their free time together?

There are limits to the leniency that they're given, but those limits are broad enough that with a little bit of care they can continue on with their... relationship?

Is that what this is? Is she *dating* her best friend?

They don't go to the dance together this year. They don't have to discuss it—they both know that they've pushed the envelope as far as it will go already.

By the end of the school year Nancy is more confused than ever, but summer is once more a strange little world unto itself, and she enjoys spending it wrapped in Barb's arms as much as possible.

* * *

Barb knows that Nancy has been crushing on Steve for a while before Steve shows any interest in her.

"He's just... a good-looking guy." Nancy shrugs.

"For someone..." Barb cuts off what was likely going to be a cutting comment. "If that's what you like looks-wise, all right. But he's not a very nice guy, you know?"

"I think there's more to him than a lot of people get to see." Nancy shrugs. "Not that it's going to matter."

"If he shows interest in you, it's for one reason and one reason only." Barb makes the proclamation as she busily shreds a piece of paper into tiny strips.

"Because that'll be so very different from what's happening now." Nancy snaps out the words without thinking, and immediately regrets them.

Barb's face has gone very pale, and she turns to face Nancy squarely. "Is that what you think?"

"No, of course not!" Nancy reaches for Barb's hand, but Barb pulls away. "Barb, I know that you care about me. And I care about you. But I also... I like the idea of dating a boy."

"You like the idea of being accepted by the popular hot guy. And probably of dating someone that your mom's going to have a heart attack about." Barb sighs, and then her hand is covering Nancy's. "Okay. I get it. You need a break and to try the socially expected thing. Go for it, Nance."

"Really?" Nancy squeezes Barb's hand.

"Like I said." Barb shrugs. "Whatever's going to make you happy. I trust you well enough to let you figure that out."

* * *

This isn't you, Nance.

Barb was wrong. Or at least... Barb wasn't entirely right. It *was* what Nancy wanted at the time. She *liked* the idea of going with Steve. She liked the idea of dating someone who was *wanted* by so many people at school. She liked the idea of a boy wanting her. She liked the idea of having sex with him, even if it's not something that she's *supposed* to want. Even if Steve didn't always seem like a very nice person, she thought she saw enough kindness in him to imagine things could turn out well.

She enjoyed herself.

She never would have done it if she knew what the cost would be.

She shouldn't have asked Barb to come with her. She shouldn't have asked Barb to stop her from doing anything foolish, not when half of why she was going was because she *hoped* she'd get to do

something... she doesn't want to think of it as foolish. Everyone *else* might think it was wrong, but why is that? Because she's not married to Steve?

She doesn't want to marry *anyone* right now. She wants to be a person in her own right, not a housewife like her mother. Jonathan was right about some of her fears, at least, even if he was wrong about what she's going to let happen in her future.

Nancy's future is going to be something she never would have imagined a year ago.

There ended up being more to Steve than Nancy had given him credit for—far more than Barb ever would have credited him with. When he thought she was in trouble, he came to help her; when monsters were literally coming out of the walls, he stayed to help.

This isn't you, Nance.

Were those even the proper words? Nancy has taken the memory out so often, turned it around and analyzed it from every angle, that she's no longer even sure she has the right words. The look on Barb's face, that she's never going to forget—the betrayal, the confusion, the fear.

Barb never would have done what Nancy did.

Barb will maybe never understand why Nancy *needed* to do it.

And Nancy wants to get a chance to explain it to her.

This isn't you, Nance.

Will Barb even recognize Nancy when she finds her again? Nancy has become someone—something?—different from what she was when Barb last saw her. Nancy has walked through the woods hunting monsters. Nancy has been to a world of ash and fear and monsters. Nancy has used her blood to lure monsters, and shot them in the face when they came to the bait.

Nancy is more than she ever thought she could be, and she's going to use that to get her best friend back.

* * *

It takes Nancy seven months to get all the tools she thinks she's going to need.

It's seven months too long. The Upside-Down is toxic to people, after all.

But Will survived for a week. And Eleven has survived for those seven months, so there *must* be a way.

Gone.

That was the word that Eleven said, repeating it in horror and terror and sorrow when she tried to find Barb.

Nancy isn't going to accept that, though. Until she finds Barb's body, she's not going to give up. And if she *does* find Barb's body... well, at least then she'll be able to give Mrs. Holland the closure that she deserves.

"She wouldn't have done this." Barb's mother hasn't made as much of a nuisance of herself as Will's did. While Joyce's grief had attracted attention—not all of it good, but at least enough to get things *done*—Mrs. Holland's grief has led to a quiet sort of isolation. "My Barb wouldn't have done this. She wouldn't have left without talking to me."

Nancy doesn't go to speak with her in person. Perhaps it's selfish of her, but she's afraid that if she talks to Mrs. Holland in person word will get back to her mother. Or, more troublesome, to the Sheriff, who might actually be able to stop her from doing something foolish. So instead she writes Mrs. Holland a note, and slides it into her mailbox the day she skips school to begin her journey.

You're right. Barb wouldn't have left without talking to you. She loved you. Barb loved so strongly, so completely, and Nancy isn't going to let her down. Hopefully still loves you. There have been weird things going on in our town lately, and Barb was caught up in them. She was taken somewhere against her will. If I can get her back, I'm going to. I promise, and I'm sorry I haven't been able to do more before now. --Nancy

She could have asked Steve or Jonathan to go with her. They stood with her against the monsters the first time, after all, when they worked hard to get Will back from the Upside-Down. Jonathan has spent the last few months all wrapped up in his little brother, though, trying to help Will adjust to being back in Hawkins—to adjust to being back in a town where his funeral was held, with memories of a nightmare world he isn't allowed to talk to anyone outside his family about.

And Steve... Steve is stronger and kinder than she had given him credit for. He stood against the monsters when it was necessary. And he's stood by her, despite it costing him his friends.

Barb is *her* friend, though. And Nancy... Nancy owes Barb an apology. And a kiss, and some promises—a discussion about what they are, and where they want to go.

Nancy has faced down monsters.

Kissing and loving a girl is nothing by comparison, and she wants a chance to talk with Barb about where they can go from here.

Or, if nothing else—Nancy adjusts the oxygen mask over her face, making sure her backpack sits comfortably on her back—she is going to bring Barb home for a proper funeral.

* * *

It hadn't been as hard as she thought it would be to acquire what she needed to go into the Upside-Down. The suits that Joyce and Sheriff Hopper had worn weren't confiscated by the government, too many of their operatives having been murdered in too quick a time span. All Joyce's attention had been on Will, and Nancy was able to make off with the suit.

Gathering weapons had been similarly simple. They know, now, some of what hurts the creatures of the Upside-Down. And Nancy is a very good shot. She's never had feelings one way or another on all the guns in her hometown, but now she's grateful for them.

Finding a way into the Upside-Down... that had been harder. She

knows that Eleven is still alive. Sheriff Hopper has been buying Eggo waffles to give to the girl, leaving them places in their world so that Eleven isn't quite so lonely in the Upside-Down. (Sheriff Hopper isn't supposed to let anyone know that Eleven is alive, but after Mike had been in deep mourning for three weeks he had come by and let slip that maybe, just maybe, things weren't as finished as everyone thought they were. That was all the incentive Nancy needed to make her vague plans solid.)

It takes two months to convince Eleven that it's a good idea. They leave each other messages, Nancy being careful to leave a pen and extra paper with her letters so that Eleven can communicate back to her.

Eventually Eleven is convinced, and Nancy has her equipment. A letter is slipped into Mrs. Holland's mailbox, and it's time to see exactly what this new Nancy can do.

* * *

The Upside-Down is no more hospitable the second time Nancy enters it, and she's glad for the respirator that allows her to breathe pure oxygen instead of the ash that floats in the air.

Eleven is there in front of her, right on the other side of the portal. The child makes a fist once Nancy is through, and the crack in the tree vanishes.

The girl looks awful. Her eyes are sunken and red-rimmed. Her hair has grown out, and though it's obvious she's tried to care for it, it's tangled and knotted. She's still wearing the dress that Mike gave her. (Nancy knows that Hopper has left other clothes for Eleven, and her heart twinges as she realizes the little girl has *chosen* this threadbare garment.)

"You know this is dangerous." Eleven's voice is flat.

"I know." Nancy shifts her pack on her back. "But sometimes you have to do things for those you love."

"You love Barb?" Eleven's head tilts, and for a moment she looks

more like a child should, curious and inquisitive.

“I love Barb.” The words taste strange on her tongue. “Like Mike loves Will. And also like Mike loves you.”

“Love is good.” Eleven hugs herself.

“Love is very good.” Nancy kneels down in front of the girl with the power to break worlds. “Thank you. For doing this.”

“I don't want you to get hurt. You're Mike's sister.” Eleven stares straight into Nancy's eyes. “If I help you, I can try to keep you safe.”

“I appreciate it.” Nancy holds her hand out.

After a moment Eleven puts her own small hand into Nancy's. “What if we can't find Barb?”

“At least I'll have tried. I'll have done everything I can. Because when you love someone, you want to do anything you can for them, even if it means walking through burning coals.” Nancy gives Eleven's hand a little squeeze.

The girl looks down, frowning. “*Your* Barb?”

Nancy blinks. “My Barb... what?”

“Have to be...” Eleven sighs, her eyes closing. “Worlds on worlds on worlds, dark and light and dark and gray. Does it have to be... your Barb?”

Nancy draws in a sharp breath. There are worlds other than the Upside-Down and their own? Her brother had talked about that, when she asked him to explain more about what the Upside-Down was. It's still hard to wrap her mind around. “My Barb, yes. That's who I want to find.”

“Okay.” Eleven sighs, turning around, though she keeps her hand in Nancy's. “We'll look.”

Nancy stands, allowing the girl to lead the way deeper into the ashen landscape.

She doesn't know exactly what they're going to find. She's prepared for the worst; she still hopes for the best.

If she does manage to take Barb home with her, what's going to happen then? Will Barb and Steve be able to get along? What about Barb and Jonathan?

It doesn't matter.

Nancy loves Barb, and she's going to bring her home.

All the other details they can work out later, when they're both safe and sound.